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**General Educational Development and the Prisons:  
Examining the Role of the GED in the Connecticut  
Prison System**

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Trinity College  
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**Introduction**

The General Educational Development (GED) Program has been around for over sixty years as an alternative way for individuals to earn a high school diploma. The GED is offered in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, ten Canadian provinces, and nine US territories; famous people who have received the GED include Mary Lou Retton, Wally “Famous” Amos, Dave Thomas, Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell, and PARADE Magazine Editor Walter Anderson (Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2000). In Connecticut all GED preparation programs are offered for free so that all people regardless of an ability to pay have access to a high school diploma, there is also a large GED program in the prisons in Connecticut. Through doing basic research regarding the GED programs in Connecticut it became obvious that there were a lot of unanswered questions regarding these GED programs in CT. So this research project asks the important question: What is the role of GED program in Connecticut in awarding high school diplomas to Connecticut residents, and more specifically what is the role of the correctional facilities in preparing, testing, and helping candidates successfully complete the GED program in CT? After a lot of research and interviews with state employees it became clear that the prisons in Connecticut stand above other GED programs in Connecticut in preparing candidates for the GED.

**Thesis:**

The General Educational Development (GED) program in Connecticut is a highly organized program that provides all residents of Connecticut the opportunity to earn a high school diploma. The prison system referred to collectively as the Unified School District #1 (USD #1) is an integral part of the GED program in Connecticut and is the

most effective program in preparing candidates to successfully complete the GED.

**Significance:**

The GED program within the prison system is an extremely important program. The program not only benefits the inmates who receive educational instruction and potentially receive a high school diploma equivalency but it is also important for society as a whole. 75 percent of inmates in federal and state prisons lack a high school diploma (Hartford Primer and Field Guide) and in Connecticut 95 percent of inmates will be released back into society (Senate Republicans, 2004). The prison system is a place where many uneducated, poor, and disproportionately minority individuals end up. Imprisonment is a form of punishment but it is also a place where inmates are given a chance to reevaluate and prepare for a new life outside of prison. Correctional facilities offer inmates many important opportunities to earn valuable educational and vocational skills where pressures to pay the bills and support family members are not a concern. It is important that prisons give inmates skills and life lessons that will help them transition when they are released so as to increase the opportunity structures that exist for ex-convicts.

The prison system in Connecticut plays a large roll in awarding high school diplomas to residents. Despite the crucial role the prisons play in educating citizens there are very few people who know about the educational programs within the Department of Corrections. It was only after a few weeks of general research into the GED that I discovered Unified School District #1 (USD #1) and it was another week before I discovered what USD #1 actually was. The Department of Correction is a state department that maintains a very separate role in the public sphere but USD #1 is funded

like all other schools in the state and offers inmates important educational opportunities, like preparing for the GED. This school system has been very successful and it is time that more people know about the important work it is doing.

Examining the role of the GED in Connecticut and in Connecticut prisons is important, too because it identifies the need for GED programs and also determines their usefulness in educating individuals in Connecticut. The GED tests are difficult exams that require a lot of preparation and dedication on the part of individuals taking the tests but also on the part of those preparing individuals for the tests. Close examination of the GED program highlights the efforts of each individual in the program as well as all of those giving academic instruction. The success of the GED program rests on the effectiveness of the instructors and the different modes of preparation; studies must be done to determine the relative utility of each of these. Educational systems are studied and assessed on every level for their efficacy in educating students and these schools are subsequently ranked and ordered against each other. GED programs should be similarly examined and compared to see what does and does not work in preparing individuals for the GED test. In all of my research there have been no conclusive reports released on the effectiveness of all state sponsored GED preparation programs in Connecticut. There are 507,514 Connecticut residents over the age of 16 without a high school diploma (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2003) and many of them utilize state sponsored programs to prepare for the GED. Conclusive reports on the effectiveness of GED programs can lead to further research in what factors and preparation methods lead to high pass rates.

## **What is the GED Program?**

The General Educational Development (GED) program first began as a national movement during and after World War II when many young men left high school to fight in the war; when these soldiers returned from war they did not have a high school diploma. The United States Armed Forces Institute funded the American Council on Education (ACE) to develop a test to determine the educational level of veterans so as to allow them to pursue educational tutoring in areas they needed work in instead of returning to high school. After World War II policymakers began to recognize that it was not only veterans who could benefit from these tests but also regular citizens who had not completed high school. New York was the first state to offer the GED as a high school diploma equivalency program in 1947 and since then ACE has “forged a partnership with all 50 states and 11 Canadian provinces to award a high school credential based on passing the GED test battery” (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2003). In 1978, 1988, and 2002 new versions of the national GED test were released that accounted for the changing expectations and higher standards of a high school diploma (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2003).

The history of awarding high school equivalency certificates in Connecticut is extensive and it dates back to before a national GED test was developed for the public. In 1925 the Connecticut’s General Assembly passed a law that allowed people to receive a certificate called the “qualifying academic certificate”, in 1945 the law was changed to allow the certificate to pass as an equivalent to a high school diploma. From 1951 to 1957 the Iowa Tests of Educational Development were used to determine whether one

was eligible for a high school equivalency diploma and in 1957 Connecticut used the Connecticut State Board of Education Equivalency Test which incorporated questions that were nationally standardized. In 1965 the certificate's name was changed to 'state high school diploma'. In 1967 the state began to use the national GED test that was created by the ACE to test individuals' academic competency. (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2002).

The 2002 GED Tests were revamped in an effort to make the GED a test indicative of a level of proficiency sufficient for one to pursue post-secondary education and/or learn higher order job skills. The five subject tests of the GED "measure the higher-order thinking skills necessary for an individual to successfully complete a postsecondary education and find and maintain employment" (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2002). The 2002 GED test is not easy to pass: "to pass the five-test battery, the GED candidate must currently demonstrate a level of skill that meets or surpasses 58 percent of graduating high school seniors" (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2002, p. 3).

There are five subject tests within the GED Test: Language Arts/Writing Skills, Social Studies, Science, Language Arts/Reading, and Mathematics. The GED Test has both English and Spanish language versions. Individuals with disabilities can apply for special considerations when taking the GED test; there is a form they must fill out and in order to gain special accommodations a doctor must diagnose the individual as having a learning or psychological disability. Options for individuals included longer time limits, large print editions, using a scribe or a calculator, needing private accommodations, scheduled breaks, or another special accommodation that the doctor recommends (Form

L-15 citation, see Appendix 2). The GED Administrator approves all individuals for special accommodations on a case by case basis.

In the GED Test each subject test has a total of 800 points for a total combined score of 4,000; in order to receive a diploma an individual must receive at least a 410 on each of the five subject tests and must have an average of 450 for the five tests or receive a composite score of 2250 for all five tests. This requires that all candidates maintain a high level of proficiency in all subjects but also be able to score higher in their respective stronger subjects. This is not an easy task for many GED candidates, the majority of whom in Connecticut have only attended school until the tenth grade and the test is also not representative of the level of academic skills most high school graduates receive: “less than three out of five graduating high school seniors were able to pass the GED Test” (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2002, p. 2).

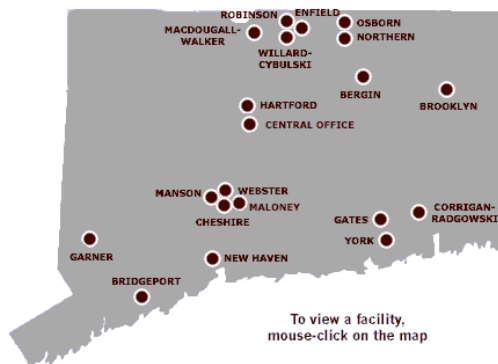
In Connecticut registration and preparation for the GED is offered free of charge in 52 approved sites all over the state, not including the 19 sites within correction facilities. GED candidates are given interviews and counseling about their options when they register for the GED program. Most candidates take the GED practice test to determine the content areas in which they need the most preparation. Testing is also offered all over the state in 25 certified testing locations. (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2002).

Candidates for the GED must be at least 17 years of age and those under the age of 18 must provide documentation that they have been withdrawn from school for at least 6 months. (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2002).



## What is Unified School District #1?

In June 1969 a school district was legally established within the Department of Corrections. The Unified School District #1 (USD #1) provides educational training: academic and vocational, to inmates within the prisons in Connecticut. There are 18 facilities in the correctional facilities across the state (see picture below), in every facility except Northern Correctional Institution because inmates at Northern were put their due to behavioral problems that require they be in solitary confinement. USD #1 employs 127 teachers and 39 vocational instructors with 11 principals, eight counselors, eight school psychologists, and fourteen libraries with twelve librarians and 66,084 books (Connecticut Department of Correction Unified School District #1, 2003-2004). USD #1 also gets student teachers from schools around CT just like any other public school would (Barber interview).



(CT Dept of Correction)

All teachers hired by USD #1 are fully certified by the state of Connecticut to teach, the school system also uses volunteers and trained inmates as tutors.

USD #1 offers a number of different educational programs for inmates. The main programs include: the Adult Basic Education program, designed for inmates performing

below the eighth grade level; the GED program, or the Adult Basic Education III, designed for those at and above the eighth grade level; the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) gives inmates English language training; Vocational Education allows inmates to learn a trade through classroom and hands-on instruction with 23 different trades; and Special Education through which every inmate develops an Individualized Education Plan with instructors and can participate in any of the other programs if it is appropriate (Connecticut Department of Correction Unified School District #1, 2002-2003).

In the 2003-2004 academic year there were 12,241 students enrolled in academic programs within USD #1 out of about 20,000 inmates (estimate from Barber interview). The average daily enrollment in courses across the school district was 2,927 with an average class size of 12-18 students (Connecticut Department of Correction Unified School District #1, 2002-2003). The school year is 12 months a year and the students are paid \$0.75/day for their work so that inmates do not choose other work within the prisons to earn money to pay for their necessities like toothpaste and shampoo (Barber interview), this is the lowest paying job within the prisons with other jobs paying about \$2/day but it does give the inmates some incentive to participate. Inmates the sign up for school are required to go every day, five days a week for three hours a day. Attendance is required at all classes because these education programs are not meant to teach only academic subjects but these inmates are also learning responsibility.

Graduation ceremonies are extremely important at USD #1. Graduates get caps and gowns and if they are allowed guests the guests are invited to the ceremonies.

William Barber, the superintendent of USD #1 said of the graduation ceremonies: “it is a

big deal, for most of them it is the most recognition they have ever seen that is not negative” (Barber interview).

In 2004 USD #1 offered the GED Test three times a month, except in July when it was offered 6 days in the month of June (See Appendix 1). The State Department of Education recently mandated that in order to comply with No Child Left Behind USD #1 must test all of its students in order to receive Title 1 funds. Instead of testing with the CAPT Tests and the CMT Tests that are currently used in all other districts, USD #1 has chosen to test with the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) and the Employability Competency System tests (ECS) (USD #1 Commentary).

## **Literature Review**

### **Why is the GED Program Important?**

The GED is an extremely important document for many individuals who have not completed high school. Education is one of the most important things to have in society today, especially a high school diploma. “Dropping out of high school is a problem both for the individual and for society. Dropouts have higher unemployment rates and lower earnings than do high school graduates. Educational attainment for those who are poor or members of minorities is particularly important for their later life chances” (Ensminger and Slusarcick, 1992, p. 95). Without a high school diploma the ability to get a decent job and make a decent salary is greatly reduced; the GED testing programs gives individuals who did not complete high school a second chance. “It is becoming increasingly necessary to have a diploma in order to be competitive in the labor market;” the average income difference between a GED graduate and a high school dropout is \$6,865 in the year 2003 and (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2003).

There are numerous reasons for dropping out and some individuals’ dropout out

of necessity and some dropout because school is not something that they enjoy or feel invested in. In Wendy Swartz's article: "School Dropouts: New Information About an Old Problem" she highlights the attitudes and motivations of dropouts have towards their decisions to dropout and their futures; her data is supplemented by extensive research the National Center for Education Research (NCES) has done on the topic. The majority of dropouts report that they tend to "believe that they don't have control over their lives...[while] graduates felt that they had a great deal of control over their lives, a belief known to promote educational achievement...Nearly one half [of dropouts] felt 'useless at times', one-third thought they were 'no good at all,' and nearly one-quarter 'didn't have much to be proud of'" (Schwartz, 1995, p.2). It is clear that there is more to educational success than just passing a test; GED preparation must educate individuals but it must also foster in them a sense of responsibility, pride, and control over their futures. An excerpt from an article written by Ivan Kuzyk for the Hartford Courant shows how passing the GED Test can give individuals a feeling of success:

Recently, I met a man from Hartford who had just completed a very long prison term. Not wanting to probe too deeply into his experience, I asked him, generally, how it felt to have spent so many years behind bars. With a sincerity that genuinely surprised me, he told me that his prison years had not been entirely wasted. He explained, revealing a quiet sense of accomplishment and gratitude, that he had completed his GED while in prison.

Several weeks later, I related the story to an acquaintance who is an official with the Department of Corrections. He wasn't a bit surprised and suggested that I attend a prison GED graduation ceremony. He told me about the solemnity, joy and excitement displayed at these ceremonies, with the proud graduates lined up on stage before audiences filled with parents, wives, girlfriends and children celebrating their loved one's success with the same

emotion and pride displayed by families at Ivy League graduations (Kuzyk, 2004).

Connecticut's prisons are currently in a severe budget crisis and are frequently overpopulated; this is occurring in states across the country and new prisons and jails are being built in nearly every state (Gordon and Weldon, 2003). States have altered prisons from being strictly houses for punishment to places where inmates can be rehabilitated: "In recent years the prison system in the United States has begun to swing away from being strictly punitive and has started to focus attention on rehabilitation. As part of the rehabilitation efforts, educating prisoners has become a widely accepted mechanism of addressing social and psychological needs of prisoners that may in fact significantly reduce the likelihood of recidivism" (Case and Fassenfest, 2004, p. 1).

Educating prisoners is proven to reduce the number of prisoners who return to prison after being released, known as recidivism. In a study conducted by Howard R. D. Gordon and Bracie Weldon the research found a strong relationship between lower recidivism rates and participation in prison education programs. The study, conducted in the Huttonsville Correctional Center in West Virginia in 1999-2000, found that participation in GED and vocational training had a positive impact on reducing recidivism. Inmates who did not participate in GED or vocational training had a recidivism rate of 26 percent while inmates who completed vocational training had a recidivism rate of 8.75 percent and those who participated in GED and vocational training had a recidivism rate of 6.71 percent (Gordon and Weldon, 2003).

Another study conducted by the Correctional Education Association found similar results. They found that: "Education programs can reduce the likelihood of repeat offending and improve public safety from everyone...Research is showing that many

adult offenders are capable of positive change” (Steurer, 2003, p. 1). The research conducted in Maryland, Minnesota and Ohio found that inmates participating in education programs had lower re-arrest rates than non-participants: 48 percent to 57 percent respectively. They also had lower re-conviction rates than non-participants: 27 % to 35 % respectively, and they had lower re-incarceration rates as well: 21 % for participants and 31% for non-participants. There was no difference between the participants and non-participants in the type of crime committed, though (Steurer, 2003).

**Methods:**

Official state and national reports were the primary research sources for this project. The Connecticut State Department of Education’s GED 2002 and 2003 GED Testing Program reports, the American Council on Education 2002 statistical report on “Who Took the GED”, and other smaller reports were the primary sources of data. Using these reports I analyzed data, consulted with the authors of the reports, and did research in an attempt to address and more thoroughly understand the role of the prison system in the administration of the GED.

For this research project I interviewed Carl Paternostro, the State of Connecticut’s GED Administrator. Through him I gained insight into the 2002 and 2003 Connecticut GED Testing Program data and how that research was collected. I asked him questions pertaining to the results of the research and also about his general experiences through working with the GED program for over 17 years. I also gained access to other internal documents from the State Department of Education and the national American Council on Education GED Testing Program.

I also met with William Barber, the Superintendent of Unified School District #1

(USD #1). Mr. Barber was very useful in demystifying USD #1: especially in it's daily operation and program resources. He also supplied important data on recidivism in CT prisons, and other pertinent information research studies.

This project is a qualitative research project relying on analyzing data contained in the primary sources as well as through personal consultations with Connecticut state officials.

### **Interpretation and Analysis:**

In the 2003-2004 academic year there were 3,234 students enrolled in USD #1 GED classes and the school district awarded 687 diplomas; in the 2002-2003 academic year there were 3,548 students enrolled and 510 diplomas awarded (Connecticut Department of Correction Unified School District #1, 2003-2004). To give some sense of the magnitude of the GED program in USD #1 we can look at the data from the Hartford Public high schools. There are three public high schools in Hartford: Bulkeley High, Weaver High, and Hartford High. In the 1998-1999 school year the Hartford public high schools had 4,140 students enrolled in grades 9-12 and 597 students graduated (Connecticut Policy and Economic Council, 2000-2001). (See Chart). The GED program in USD #1 awarded more high school diplomas in one year than the entire Hartford school district despite the fact that USD #1 had fewer students, there were 906 more students enrolled in Hartford Public High Schools but USD #1 awarded 90 more diplomas.

	Hartford Public Schools	USD #1
# of Students Enrolled	4,140	3,234
Graduates	597	687

In the state of Connecticut 5,420 individuals took the GED test in 2003, of those 2,952 passed the battery of tests. The USD #1 diplomas awarded (687) represent 23 percent of those passing the GED test in Connecticut. The 2003 GED Program Report published by the state of Connecticut reported a pass rate of 61.5 % but it is unclear how that number was calculated, if you use the numbers just mentioned the pass rate is 54 percent, not 61.5. According to the 2003-2004 USD #1 performance report USD #1 had a pass rate of 60% (Connecticut Department of Correction Unified School District #1, 2003-2004), so it is better based on my calculations and comparable if you use the pass rate the State provides.

In preparing candidates for the GED Test there are certain characteristics that statistically put one at a disadvantage; these disadvantages are on the basis of age, race, and academic history. The older you are the lower your odds to pass the GED Test, if you did not complete up to the tenth grade in high school you have a smaller chance of passing the GED Test, and if you are not White your odds for passing the test are also lower. Within every category USD #1 has a large percentage of inmates, inherently making the inmates statistically less likely to pass the GED tests, and yet the pass rates in prisons are high.

The following chart shows the state level data for the racial breakdown of those taking and passing the GED Test in CT. As the chart shows, the racial groups that have the highest pass rates are the lowest proportion of the prison population and those with the lowest pass rates have much higher numbers in the prisons. One in eleven men between the ages of 18 to 64 were in the prison system in the state of Connecticut in the year 2000. In the State of Connecticut Whites took the test and passed at higher rates



than any other minority group in Connecticut, but they constitute the smallest proportion of the prison population. Minorities represented 55.4 % of test takers in the State (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2003) but the prison population is 77 percent minority (Hartford Primer and Field Guide), we cannot assume the educational programs within the prisons are completely representational of these proportions but there are definitely a large majority of minorities in the programs. Inmates in Connecticut prisons are disproportionately minority making preparation for the GED more difficult within USD #1.

	% of Examinees (State)	Pass Rate (State)	% of Prison Population
Whites	44.6	79	22
Hispanics	28	46.5	35
Blacks	18.5	47.3	42

Inmates face disadvantages passing the GED test on the basis of age as well. In Connecticut, the largest age cohort to take and pass the GED test was under the age of 21. In the state, 41.7 percent of those taking the test were under the age of 21, while USD #1 has only 36.5 percent of those preparing for the GED test under the age of 21. The average age of a USD #1 student is 27, research has shown that the older one is and the longer one has been out of school the harder it is to pass the GED test (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2003). Candidates for the GED over the age of 26 are much less likely to pass the test than those under the age of 26 (see chart below). Those age cohorts that have the highest pass rates: age 16-18 have a pass rate of 81.7 and those 19-20 have a pass rate of 69.8, this is compared with a 51.3 % pass rate for 26-29 year olds. The population in the prisons taking the GED test is 27 while the average age in the state of Connecticut is 24. This three year difference represents an important difference when pass rates are compared for those age groups. And yet, USD #1 has an overall pass rate

that is basically the same, if not higher depending on the figure used.

	% of Examinees (State)	Pass Rate (State)
Under 21	41.7	67.9
21-25	25.6	59.8
26-29	9	51.3
30-35	9	50.4

Finally, USD #1 has a large and highly uneducated prison population. The average educational performance level an inmate participating in the educational programs within USD #1 performed at was the sixth grade in reading, mathematics, and language arts (Connecticut Department of Correction Unified School District #1, 2002-2003). According to State statistics one is most likely to pass the GED Test if the candidate remains in school until at least the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. 60 percent of GED candidates in the state of Connecticut have completed school until the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2003) and less than 32 percent have finished less than the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, while as mentioned before the average inmate performs at the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level. It is unknown how that relates to grade level, but the average ninth grader in Hartford is performing at a sixth grade reading level (Hartford Primer and Field Guide); it is safe to assume that many of these inmates have not attended school until the tenth grade based on their academic ability. Statewide, individuals who attended school until the ninth grade had a combined pass rate of 55 percent while individuals who had completed tenth grade or above had a combine pass rate of 65 percent (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2003). So again, USD #1 has a population of highly disadvantaged students and it is still achieving high pass rates with its students.

Every individual who takes the GED test is given a survey they must fill out regarding personal characteristics, including age, sex, race, etc., but questions are also

asked about how they heard about the test, prepared for the test, and their reasons for taking the test. In all of these areas, the prison system scores very highly on their pass rates. When asked: “What were your reasons for taking the Test?” those who responded that it would grant them “Early Release” [from prison] had a pass rate of 73.8%, the third highest pass rate of all responses. When asked: “How did you hear about the GED?” those who responded: From a “Prison Official” had a pass rate of 63.1%, the fourth highest of all responses. The final question: “How did you prepare for the GED test?” is a little more difficult to analyze because the survey allowed multiple responses, Correctional Facilities had a pass rate of 67.3%, a high pass rate, especially compared to the state pass rate of 61.5%. This was tenth on the list, but the correctional facilities also use Official Practice Tests to prepare (one of the other options) and that had a higher pass rate of 72.1 % (seventh highest in the list) and they also use the internet and computers which had a pass rate of 75.2, the fifth highest. It is difficult to interpret this data due to the way it was collected but the high pass rate for correctional facility preparation is telling.

### **Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications for Further Research:**

The Unified School District #1 does an excellent job of preparing students for the GED. Despite the fact that USD #1 students are typically disadvantaged on the basis of race, age, and previous education attained the pass rates at USD #1 are higher or comparable depending on which figure is used. Inmates in Connecticut are given an excellent opportunity for an education within the prisons and they are highly motivated and active learners in the program. USD #1 is providing a viable option for students of

all ages to address limited educational success using a series of programs, including the GED. The GED program provides the opportunity for students who have never been successful to succeed. The state puts tremendous resources into the program and success rates reflect that commitment.

This study did a lot of highlight the successes of the Unified School District #1 but there is not enough research out there that gives detailed information about success rates in other state funded GED preparation programs that makes preparation comparison possible. There are free classes offered in 52 sites across the state and there were no studies done to track the success of the candidates who prepared at each of those sites.

Because this research project involved collecting data from numerous different reports that were published by different Connecticut state departments there was a lot of data that was missing. The USD #1 GED program data gives numbers for how many individuals are involved in the program and gives numbers for how many passed the test but it never tells how many people took the test that year. The Connection State Department of Education reports tell how many people took the test across the state and how many people passed but does not tell how many people were enrolled in GED preparation programs. Also, the pass rate of 61.5 % for the state in 2003 was not a number I could calculate using the number of people who passed the test divided by the number of people who took the test, I have no idea how this pass rate was calculated. The missing data and unclear calculations make comparison very difficult.

More research must be done that analyzes the GED programs across the state. Every aspect of the GED program must be studied in order for improvements to be made in the program. If each mode of preparation is studied for its effectiveness and passing

success, states officials can see which programs are doing the best job and improve the programs that are not as effective. As shown throughout this paper the GED is an extremely important document for many people: it represents better opportunities, higher wages, and a lower rate of returning to prison. The state should do research that ensures the best GED program is offered to those who need diplomas across the state.

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